

# **The Role of Religion in Colombia's Reconciliation**

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*The opinions expressed by the author in this article are his own and do not reflect or represent the official position or policy of the United States Army or the United States Army Chaplain Corps.*

## **Introduction**

As the decades-long conflict between the Colombian military and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) comes to an end, the reconciliation process between these two warring factions presents a multitude of challenges. As Colombia's national government attempts to expand its reach from urban areas into vast swaths of previously ungoverned rural territory, military, law enforcement and social services personnel will encounter a newly minted demilitarized zone populated by indigenous peoples suffering from illiteracy, poverty and the ravages of civil war. The end of the Colombian conflict instantly presents new priorities for national and regional leaders including the creation of infrastructure, the establishment of law and order, and the reintegration of rebel warriors into Colombian society. The Colombian government will call upon a vast array of forces including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to tackle the many obstacles that threaten to derail a lasting reconciliation between government and rebel forces—and indeed between the dramatically different populations of urban and rural Colombia. This paper addresses the role that organized religion can play in this daunting process that includes repentance, forgiveness and ultimately, reconciliation.

## **The Ministry of Reconciliation**

This sacramental journey in Colombia reflects Saint Paul's admonishment to the Christian church in Corinth to reconcile with one another and to live in peace as the body of Christ. Paul wrote these healing words of comfort to a deeply divided Corinthian church in the first century: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Soft Power of the Sacraments in Conflict Resolution**

Does the Apostle Paul's message about the ministry of reconciliation from the First Century imply that religion has a role to play in bringing an end to the Colombian civil war and then in helping the various warring factions to forgive one another and live in peace? Does religion *matter* when it comes to negotiating peace treaties and restoring broken relationships? Gerard Powers, who serves as the Coordinator for the Catholic Peacebuilding Network and the Director of Policy Studies for the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, believes that politicians and diplomats who ignore or downplay the impact of religious values on society by definition fail to consider religion as part of the solution to resolve conflicts. "Unfortunately, policymakers, whether in the U.S. government or the United Nations, have not paid enough attention to—and do not always fully understand—the other aspect of the ambivalence of the sacred."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17-19 (English Standard Version).

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Powers, "Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion" (paper presented at the Holy See Side Event, United Nations, New York, NY, October 7, 2008).

Indeed if the “ambivalence of the sacred” had been considered as part of a Religious Area Analysis conducted by military chaplains *prior* to Operation Iraqi Freedom, perhaps mission planners would have pondered the impact of toppling a Sunni dictator who had ruled the majority Shia population with an iron hand for many years. Instead, U.S. military leaders, policy makers and diplomats placed a greater emphasis on the anticipated positive political impact of Saddam Hussein’s removal rather than focus upon the potential second and third order effects of a Shia majority population exacting revenge upon the Sunni minority that had stifled their religious freedom. As Powers states, “What is needed is not less religion, as some policymakers suggest. What is needed is more religion, more authentic religion.”<sup>3</sup>

This concept of “more authentic religion” infers that the Roman Catholic Church in Colombia should not endeavor to replace or even imitate an NGO, but rather should emphasize the unique blessings it brings to the peacebuilding table. “Religion plays this indispensable role in peacebuilding when its three main assets—its beliefs, its transnational institutional resources, and its ability to influence and mobilize people—are put to work in an integrated way.”<sup>4</sup> The location of parishes in rural Colombian villages and the capacity of the Roman Catholic Church to leverage support from NGOs and Catholic charities places it in a unique position to help in the reconciliation process.

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<sup>3</sup> Powers, “Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion.”

<sup>4</sup> Powers, “Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion.”

<sup>5</sup> Powers, “Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion.”

“In parts of Colombia, especially in rural areas, there are Catholic parishes with demobilized right-wing paramilitaries, left-wing guerillas, and government soldiers—and returning displaced people who have been victimized by all three. Pastors in these parishes are using the resources provided by Caritas Colombia, Catholic Relief Services, and the UN Development Program and other international agencies, to help with the long-term process of rehabilitation of that fractured community.”<sup>5</sup>

Gerard Powers effectively communicates the reality that the Roman Catholic Church in Colombia—while working alongside NGOs and Catholic charities—must not neglect its primary role to offer Word and Sacrament ministry to all former combatants and their victims to truly bring about genuine reconciliation. This represents the soft power of the sacraments.

“That pastor must also help his parish realize its mission in its deepest religious and spiritual sense. He must, for example, help his parishioners internalize the true meaning—including the communal meaning—of the sacraments of reconciliation and Holy Communion in their conflict-torn community. That is the kind of ‘soft power’ that political scientists talk about, which gives the Church in Colombia hope that it can help create a culture of peace to replace the culture of violence that is the predictable result of decades of war.”<sup>6</sup>

## **The Impact of Liberation Theology on the Colombian Conflict**

One of the primary obstacles in transforming Colombian society from a culture of violence to a culture of peace consists of the pervasive influence of Liberation Theology on certain populations of the guerilla fighters. Although the Roman Catholic Church in Colombia has played a pivotal role in the reconciliation process, it must still overcome the perception of perpetual collusion with the Colombian government, which led to the development of Liberation Theology as a powerful propaganda tool for rebel insurgency movements. Ironically, the emergence of Liberation Theology as an unintended consequence from the Second Vatican Council initiative to combat poverty in Latin America actually fanned the flames of rebellion

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<sup>6</sup> Powers, “Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion.”

against the Colombian government and the Roman Catholic Church—especially among the members of the radical group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) who deliberately connected the class warfare in rural Colombian communities to the earthly ministry of Jesus to the poor.

“Thus, liberation theology’s belief that one can be liberated by helping oppressed social classes achieve their aspirations and, moreover, that such action can and should be achieved by political activism, ensured the ELN was infused with a militant form of religious social consciousness.”<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the post-Vatican II zeal to eradicate poverty in Latin America quickly collided with the harsh reality that an emotionally vulnerable laity—often encouraged by well-intentioned Roman Catholic priests—manipulated the message to create an anti-government and antichurch propaganda. “The spirit of the Second Vatican Council, with its emphasis on a social gospel and subsequent ‘preferential option for the poor,’ combined with an aggressive anti-establishment posture, informed the worldview of these militant priests and their organization.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed in the eyes of many impoverished, uneducated Colombians living in rural areas, the Colombian government and the Roman Catholic Church intentionally and deliberately conspired together to dominate the poor and oppressed. “In the past, Colombia’s Catholic Church exemplified the Christendom model of the intertwining of church, state, and society, and Colombia’s Church remains one of the most powerful in Latin America.”<sup>9</sup>

Although the FARC does not share the ELN’s passion for liberation theology nor considers it as its ideological center of gravity, their leadership has exploited the symbiotic relationship between the Colombian government and the Roman Catholic Church to foment

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<sup>7</sup> “Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation,” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, September 15, 2013, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/classroom>.

<sup>8</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. “Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation.”

<sup>9</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. “Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation.”

resentment against both institutions among the ethnic minority populations who live in rural Colombia. “The FARC’s strength lies not just in military force but in popular rural resentment against wealthier (urban) Colombians.”<sup>10</sup> This popular rural resentment emboldened the FARC and forced the Colombian government to cede control of vast areas of the Colombian countryside to FARC authority.

“The government allowed the FARC to exert formal control over large safe zones during negotiations in the late 1990s, but when four years of negotiations failed to produce results, the incoming administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) opted for a hardline military approach that disbanded the demilitarized zone and registered numerous successes.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Translating Military Success into Reconciliation among Colombians**

Even though the Colombian government temporarily allowed the FARC to operate with impunity in rural portions of the country during the 1990s, the Roman Catholic Church did not cease to provide Word and Sacrament ministry to its parishioners in those areas and often catholic clergy, nuns and lay leaders became casualties of war. “Church leaders have been assassinated and threatened, congregations and parishes have been displaced, and churches have been closed because of violence.”<sup>12</sup> In a very real sense, the suffering endured by priests, nuns and other church officials has placed the local parish in rural Colombia in a unique position to offer support to the thousands of displaced victims of the civil war.

“At the local level, too, the churches are providing legal, psychological, physical, and spiritual support to victims, especially to the displaced and most vulnerable. They have sought ways to help communities honor and dignify victims, support conscientious objectors, provide sanctuary,

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<sup>10</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. “Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation.”

<sup>11</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. “Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation.”

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Bouvier, “Colombian Churches, Faith Groups Engage to Urge Peace,” *The Olive Branch* (blog), July 2, 2013, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/olivebranch/colombian-churches-faith-groups-engage-urge-peace>.

engage in prayer and action for peace, and promote truth, justice, reparations, and reconciliation.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Reintegration of Rebel Fighters**

In spite of the enduring presence of the Roman Catholic parish in rural Colombia and the willingness of the priests, nuns and lay leaders to facilitate the above-listed means of attaining reconciliation, the greatest obstacle remains the reluctance of former rebel fighters to reintegrate into their former communities.

“However, former combatants have historically struggled to reintegrate into Colombian civil society in a stable and enduring fashion. As a consequence, many of them end up contributing to a different threat to stability, what the Government of Colombia calls ‘new emerging criminal bands,’ which are disproportionately comprised of ‘demobilized’ former illegal fighters and are deeply involved in the pervasive Colombian narco-networks.”<sup>14</sup>

The failure to reintegrate, however, does not lie exclusively at the feet of the former rebel fighters.

“Social reconciliation does not play a significant role, in communities where the open wounds of conflict fester and the related identities strongly determine willingness to receive former combatants. Extreme prejudice and even vengeance violence creates a major hurdle for stable reintegration.”<sup>15</sup>

## **Colombian Women as a Combat Force Multiplier for Peace**

Although Colombian attitudes on the traditional roles of men and women reflect the societal values of Latin America emphasizing male leadership in the household and workplace,

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<sup>13</sup> Bouvier, “Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation.”

<sup>14</sup> “Bridging the Political and Religious Spheres in Support of Peacemaking,” International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://icrd.org/colombia/>.

<sup>15</sup> International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. “Bridging the Political and Religious Spheres in Support of Peacemaking.”

Colombian women of faith—especially those who reside in rural areas—will ultimately play a pivotal role in the reconciliation process.

“The roles of women and religious institutions in the fabric of Colombian society are somewhat unique, extending across the deep divisions that the violence has produced. In rural and peripheral urban areas, where many former combatants return, women and men tend to have more sharply defined social roles. These roles, however, often permit women more freedom to engage one another across conflict lines, and more liberty to raise challenges to fixed positions than their higher-profile male counterparts might.”<sup>16</sup>

One of these “more sharply defined social roles” that Colombian women have assumed during the civil war consists of serving as the sole adult leader of the family because their husbands never returned from the battlefield. “In many cases in Colombia, women represent entire communities as heads-of-households, where the men have either been killed or joined the combatants.”<sup>17</sup> And how will these women of faith participate in the national healing process and with whom will they reconcile? “Importantly, a significantly higher proportion of women form the ranks of the guerillas than they did in the previously demobilized paramilitaries. These demobilized female combatants will have different needs than their male counterparts.”<sup>18</sup>

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has established a 300-member ecumenical group of women peacebuilders (Spanish acronym, GemPaz) to equip and empower Colombian women to not only reconcile with demobilized female combatants, but also to shape the healing process of the Colombian people, to bridge the gap between urban and rural communities. “Women of faith have a special place in cementing the peace. In GemPaz’s work, the women’s shared spiritual approach has allowed communication across class, political and geographic lines

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<sup>16</sup> International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. “Bridging the Political and Religious Spheres in Support of Peacemaking.”

<sup>17</sup> International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. “Bridging the Political and Religious Spheres in Support of Peacemaking.”

<sup>18</sup> International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. “Bridging the Political and Religious Spheres in Support of Peacemaking.”

that can create a model for the rest of Colombian society in a post-conflict setting.”<sup>19</sup> The GemPaz overarching strategy for a “shared spiritual approach” emphasizes rehabilitation over retribution, sacramental healing over hatred. “The mechanisms used by GemPaz to promote peacebuilding include psycho-social healing and restorative justice, a system of rehabilitating offenders through reconciliation with victims and communities rather than with punishment.”<sup>20</sup>

The members of GemPaz have turned to the church and its established theological standing as “sacred space” to facilitate the reconciliation process.

“The group’s work involves arranging use of church spaces where people affected by violence, both as victims and aggressors, can meet and unburden themselves. They are partnering with other women to restore the social fabric at the community level and encouraging efforts to rebuild relations between government institutions and social organizations that have been fractured by armed conflict. They’re making a priority of developing local leaders and helping them strengthen their abilities to deal with individual victims, perpetrators and communities.”<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Roman Catholic Church and other organized religious bodies and ecumenical councils have greatly contributed to the peace process achieved thus far in the cessation of the Civil War in Colombia. As the Colombian government now endeavors to extend its influence into rural communities previously controlled by the FARC, it must shift its focus to the reconciliation and reintegration of guerilla fighters with Colombian military and police force members and between all fighters and the multitude of victims who have lost loved ones in the

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<sup>19</sup> Fred Strasser, “Colombia: Religious Women Prepare for Reconciliation After War,” *The Olive Branch* (blog), July 30, 2015, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/olivebranch/2015/07/30/colombia-religious-women-prepare-reconciliation-after-war>.

<sup>20</sup> Strasser, “Colombia: Religious Women Prepare for Reconciliation After War.” (Strasser 2015)

<sup>21</sup> Strasser, “Colombia: Religious Women Prepare for Reconciliation After War.” (Strasser 2015)

conflict. The Colombian government must work with NGOs and the Roman Catholic Church to help the thousands of residents of rural Colombia who have been displaced from their homes during the lengthy civil war. The Roman Catholic Church will continue to play a significant role in this ministry of reconciliation by emphasizing the soft power of the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confession and Absolution and by offering its “sacred spaces” for former enemies to meet and seek forgiveness. Colombian women from various faith groups who comprise GemPaz will continue to assist in the healing process by their fervent encouragement for female guerilla fighters to reconcile with their neighbors who lost husbands and children in the conflict.

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